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Vietnam's New Senate: The Ky Question

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SAIGON—Even in normal times this is a city that thrives on rumor and speculation, a city highly attuned to the latest movements of seemingly obscure Vietnamese colonels or to the phraseology of deliberately obscurant Buddhist monks.

But in this immediate post-election period, Saigon is like a glutton at a feast. The table is overloaded with savory gossip and delicious conjecture.

Yet there's also some serious analysis of election returns, and much of it concerns the newly elected senate. Senate results aren't officially verified yet and are being protested as fraudulent by several dozen losing candidate slates. Assuming, however, that the protests—legitimate or not—will prove futile, the results appear to be a serious defeat for Vice President-elect Ky and if only because of this, a success for President-elect Thieu.

Senate results also are viewed here as a major victory for Vietnam's well-organized Roman Catholic minority, which dominates three of the six victorious slates. The new senate will also be heavily stocked with men of North Vietnamese origin. Since neither Catholics nor "Northerners" are very popular with southern Buddhists, who are in the majority, the election results have already prompted outcries from militant Buddhists and students as well as from unsuccessful candidates.

Along with three Catholic-dominated senate slates, the top vote getters are a slate representing factions of the Hoa Hao Buddhist sect, a slate largely composed of members of the nationalistic Dai Viet Party and a slate headed by retired military officers.

Still Wary of Labels

American embassy analysts remain wary of labeling the new senate as pro-government or pro-Thieu, though some do view the results as weakening Marshal Ky's position. The analysts stress that the 60 senators on the winning slates include a number of strongly independent-minded men. Moreover, they say that whatever personal or ideological loyalties the 60 senators hold, they all may emerge as principally concerned with guarding or expanding legislative power vis-a-vis the executive.

"President Johnson has lots of Senate friends, but they don't always vote with him," says one official. American observers expect considerable shifting of alliances and alignments in the senate, depending on the issue involved. On the issue of peace, the outlook is for a fairly hard-line senate majority; analysts see few if any doves among prospective legislators.

Vietnamese observers, viewing the senate

returns in the context of the continuing Thieu-Ky tensions, tend to see the results as a solid Thieu victory; this analysis is particularly prevalent among Marshal Ky's entourage. These Ky men see the Catholic-dominated slate as more sympathetic to Mr. Thieu than to Mr. Ky, only partly because the president-elect is Catholic himself. The Dai Viet slate owes first loyalty to the Dai Viet party leader and defeated presidential candidate Ha Thuc Ky (no relation to Marshal Ky), but Ky cohorts say the Dai Viet leader is on far better terms with Thieu than with the marshal and that he may well accept a cabinet post in the Thieu government. The Ky men say the Hoa Hao slate also tends toward Thieu, while two pro-Ky Hoa Hao slates lost out in the election. The slate headed by retired army officers may be more independent, but will probably sway with any prevailing Thieu winds, Ky advisors add.

According to Ky backers as well as less partial observers, even if 60 totally impartial and independent senators took office it would amount to a major defeat for the marshal. Under the new Vietnamese constitution the vice president's powers are close to nonexistent: He is titular head of several ministerial committees and does not even succeed the president if he should die in office. President-elect Thieu gives no sign that he's willing to share presidential power with Marshal Ky. Asked recently what Marshal Ky's responsibilities will be, he simply responded that the constitution clearly states them. Given this situation, it's believed by Ky men and others that Marshal Ky desperately needed a bloc of senate supporters to provide him with an independent power base. "Ky lost out completely," says one of his advisors.

One Ky man says the marshal did in fact put out the word to military administrators in the provinces to line up peasant support for pro-Ky senate slates. The source says the move failed partly because Vietnam's military men naturally favor the older and senior ground-troops commander, Mr. Thieu, over the brash young air marshal; partly because military men wanted to wind up on the winning side of the power struggle, and partly because Marshal Ky became increasingly moody and dispirited as the campaign progressed and made little active effort to press his cause.

(One senate election loser, considered in the Ky camp, is the Coconut Alliance, three senate slates composed of Hoa Hao members, Cao Dai religion representatives, Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang Party men, plus some Saigon activist intellectuals. Tough-talking, American-educated Coconut spokesman Nguyen Ngoc Linh is metaphorical in defeat. "Political organization is like a skyscraper. You need a solid foundation. Then you have to build slowly, one floor at a time, waiting for the cement to harden. We used an existing foundation and tried to build 10 floors simultaneously. The cement was too soft. If all four skyscrapers might have withstood the winds

that blew. But one of the supports cracked. We don't have much of a skyscraper left." The weak support, Mr. Linh says, was the Cao Dai faction, which "sat on its fat rear end." Mr. Linh also says that the Coconut Alliance received no active aid from Marshal Ky. But Mr. Linh says the Coconut Alliance is far from dead. "The Coconut tree must have deeper roots among the peasants. We'll spend the next three years nursing those roots, developing local organization and local political bosses. We'll have a much stronger tree next election.")

Thieu-Ky friction continues to dominate both political analysis and dinner-table gossip here. One recent incident: General Thieu, despite prior agreement and top-level American urging, refused to share billing with Marshal Ky on a Saigon-taped Meet the Press interview. Mr. Thieu appeared on the show alone. It's understood that the naturally cautious president-elect was pushed into this tough position by members of his entourage eager for him to show Marshal Ky immediately who's boss. "Ky is furious. Thieu won't even let him save face," says one distressed Ky advisor.

The marshal's future course remains in the realm of rumor, with some speculating that he will sullenly accept the second fiddle position and others believing he may refuse to take office as vice president and instead seek to return to the air force. Totally unsubstantiated rumors suggest the marshal might secretly throw in his lot with election protesters.

The strangest Saigon rumors, however, concern Truong Dinh Dzu, the bitterly anti-government "peace" candidate, who collected nearly one-fifth of the presidential ballots. Here are five of the "explanations" for his surprising success.

Vietcong Theory. Circulated by some Vietnamese government officials, it holds that Mr. Dzu was secretly supported by the Vietcong, particularly in the populous delta region. The argument is "supported" by Mr. Dzu's substantial vote in a number of insecure provinces. Detractors of this theory note that the Vietcong aimed at an election boycott and terrorism.

American officials seem wary of the Vietcong theory, if only because it's not comforting to believe the Vietcong could do so well.

Secret-Support Theory.

Government Conspiracy Theory. Popular with supporters of some other defeated civilian candidates, it argues that Generals Thieu and Ky secretly supported Mr. Dzu to disgrace more respected pre-election civilian favorites, Tran Van Huong and Phan Khac Suu. Detractors argue that Mr. Dzu represents more of an embarrassment—perhaps even a danger—to the military government than would lackluster elder statesmen.